

ASU lab is fab for small and midsize businesses

The SMB Lab at ASU's West Valley campus gives local entrepreneurs the help they need to support their ventures

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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Ryan Tussing recently reflected on the significant heartbreak he has witnessed throughout his career as a firefighter. He has encountered numerous instances of homes reduced to ashes, the devastating loss of cherished family heirlooms and the tragic passing of beloved pets.

"I'm tired of carrying dead dogs and cats out of houses because we can't find them fast enough," he said on April 25 to a group of approximately 40 people gathered in a meeting room at Arizona State University. "We don't know if they're there. We don't know where they're hiding. We don't know the layout of the house. So, what do we do?"

Tussing and his brother, Rusty, say they have developed a groundbreaking solution to protect beloved pets: the [Rescue Retriever](#). This paw-shaped device functions as a smoke detector specifically for animals, designed to notify firefighters of a pet's presence within the home and guide them to its location during a fire emergency.

The Tussing brothers, who have spent the past few years bringing their entrepreneurial endeavor to market, are turning to the [SMB Lab](#) (small- and medium-sized businesses) for guidance to raise capital, scale their product and bring more awareness to the public.

Based on the ASU [West Valley campus](#) and powered by the [W. P. Carey School of Business](#), the lab is a first-of-its-kind initiative connecting local commerce with business leaders, development professionals, and ASU faculty and students to help solve real, pressing business problems.

The SMB Lab was created as a response to COVID-19's impact on Arizona's small and midsize businesses. Founders [Hitendra Chaturvedi](#) and [Gopalakrishnan Mohan](#), supply chain management professors, wanted to build an ecosystem for local businesses and infuse critical resources from the university back into the community.

"We define entrepreneurship a little broader than the traditional definition to include tech startups, small and medium businesses, and gig workers," said Chaturvedi, who hosts four to six labs a year that bring in multiple companies every session.

"SMB Lab is a great example of how universities like ASU are helping local small businesses — businesses that form the supply chain of the large companies. The lab not only helps small businesses by creating real tangible value but also for faculty and students. It is a win-win-win. No

other university has taken on such an audacious goal.”

Mohan said smaller and medium-sized businesses were suffering more than larger businesses after the pandemic.

“They had no way to connect with ASU and were missing out on critical resources the university could provide to them, so we offered this program to them,” said Mohan, who is also a senior associate dean of faculty and the director of the [W. P. Carey School of Technology, Innovation and Entrepreneurship](#).

The program, which has conducted approximately a half-dozen labs this past year, helps build an ecosystem around Valley-based SMBs. They include corporate engagement and strategic partners within ASU’s [Knowledge Enterprise](#), the community partnership team within ASU’s Edson Entrepreneurship + Innovation Institute, and the community affairs teams within ASU’s [Office of Government and Community Engagement](#), the Small Business Administration and West Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce.

The three-hour labs are a free forum with separate breakout sessions where select business owners and entrepreneurs can connect to experienced leaders and community experts who offer up solutions to specific issues.

But the lab does not stop there. These solutions are then taken up by student teams and are implemented to create tangible quantifiable value.

Mohan said that most entrepreneurs fall into one of three categories by the time they reach the SMB Lab.

“They’re either trying to nail it, scale it, and then want to sail with it,” Mohan said. “Most of them are in the nail or scale phase but we’re here to help with all three. The joy is watching them grow and succeed.”

Community impacts

Businessman Tom Czyz finds himself in the scaling phase of his enterprise. As the CEO of [Intent Brands](#), a Valley-based beverage manufacturer, he has seen a 10–15% growth in his business since he attended the SMB Lab last year.

“We were looking for help on the digital and social media side of things for sales distribution,” said Czyz, who runs the business with his wife. Both are optometrists and attended the most recent SMB Lab as mentors. “The lab really helped us home in on where we fit in the market and where we should be manufacturing our products. It’s been an amazing process.”

The SMB Lab also served as the venue for Czyz’s introduction to Thomas J. Inserra, the CEO of [Integro Bank](#). After they met and several meetings later, Inserra extended an offer of a small business loan to Intent Brands aimed at enhancing the company’s visibility and profitability.

“I’m a serial entrepreneur and this is my fifth startup company,” said Inserra, whose loans range from \$50,000 to \$5 million. “Our bank exists to help small businesses because we feel they are an underserved community in Arizona. I’ve been participating in the lab for several months now and I

find it really rewarding.”

Inserra said less than 4% of all bank loans goes to helping small- and medium-sized businesses, but 100% of Integro’s loans are geared for SMB’s.

“We’re impacting an awful lot of small businesses in the community, and I find that deeply rewarding,” Inserra said.

Laura Hansen said she also wants to make an impact in her community. As the owner of the Saddle Mountain Brewing Company in Goodyear, she’s looking to the SMB Lab to help her improve marketing, branding and distribution.

“We were the first full-production brewery in Goodyear, and we celebrated our 10th year in business in 2024,” Hansen said. “But when the pandemic hit, everything shut down and our distributor went out of business. Then after we came back from the pandemic, no one showed up for their jobs. I had no cooks in the kitchen for days on end and was hit with a lot of these hardships. So, we’ve struggled through a lot.”

Despite those hardships, Hansen is looking ahead. She is looking to expand her brand and open a second location. She is fortunate to have encountered Ivan Carreno, who participated in a breakout session for Hansen, where he generously shared his insights and expertise as a well-positioned mentor.

“As an owner, Laura is inundated with the day-to-day operations of her business and needs help with her distribution network, which is why I’m here and to help point her in the right direction,” said Carreno, who helps run Carreño Brothers LLC, distributors of premium Mexican spirits throughout Arizona. “The most valuable thing she can learn right now is how to deal with a big distributor or finding a way to do this on your own. I want her to understand which are the best options for her so that she can make that choice.”

Brittany Salazar has some choices to make as well. As the co-owner of the New Penny Café in Avondale and Enroute Coffee and Tea House in Goodyear, she is looking to enter the catering market, improve branding and increase profitability.

“I used to work for Paradise Bakery, and I only know a little about catering from the huge amount they would do,” said Salazar, whose partners in New Penny Café include Laura Hansen and Deni Banach. “The problem is I don’t know how to implement the processes to get to that point because they had catering managers and a team that was already in place. So, I’m trying to get that established for New Penny. En Route is growing and expanding the suite next door and adding food. For that business, our challenge is how to get our current client base to make that transition.”

A road map for success

Salazar, Hansen and the Tussing brothers are actively pursuing enhancements and scalability in their business operations. All agreed their participation in the SMB Lab proved to be highly advantageous.

“This lab was about team building for us,” Rusty Tussing said. “Those in attendance can help guide us in almost every element on business. We expanded our network to include bankers, digital

marketers, supply chain managers, data analysts who listened to our pitch and allowed us to tell our story. This will help us expand and grow our company.”

Salazar said she received double the benefit given that two of her businesses received valuable input.

“As a business owner, sometimes your circle is so small that it was exciting to hear others in the industry brainstorm and bounce ideas off each other,” Salazar said. “I’m ready to get started on implementing some of these things.”

Hansen said her main takeaway was never to remain static or complacent because public tastes and the way of doing business is ever-changing and evolving.

“Even though I’ve been open for 10 years, I need to continually set goals and align with them,” Hansen said.

Unseen benefits

The advantages of the SMB Lab for business owners are clear; however, its benefits extend to other members of the community as well.

Jeanine Jerkovic, director of economic development for the city of Surprise, attended the April 25 SMB Lab for a variety of reasons. The city is building a new downtown and runs a business incubator program called Spark Surprise. Jerkovic said she’s looking at the SMB Lab for pointers.

“We’re looking at building our new downtown like joining a gym because everybody’s at a different fitness level,” Jerkovic said. “We’re reimagining entrepreneurship and are taking a customized approach. We want a model that engages both students, mentors and other entrepreneurs in the community. We think this could be a good approach and we’re looking for best practices.”

The SMB Lab is a pretty good example. So far, it has helped 25 companies in a dozen labs and has created approximately \$16 million — and counting — in quantifiable value.

Chaturvedi and Mohan believe the lab’s impact could one day be global.

“It all started with a simple goal — to transform the lives of 1 billion entrepreneurs ... one business at a time. What followed was more than a journey; it became a movement,” Chaturvedi said. “Today, we stand shoulder to shoulder with an ever-growing ecosystem of believers, partners and catalysts.”

Molly Loonam with the W. P. Carey School of Business marketing and communications team contributed to this article.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Twins Rusty and Ryan Tussing introduce their Rescue Retriever business idea that will help save animals from house fires during a SMB Labs workshop on Friday, April 25, at ASU's West Valley campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



W. P. Carey School of Business Associate Dean Gopalakrishnan Mohan speaks at a SMB Labs workshop on Friday, April 25, at ASU's West Valley campus.



Brittany Salazar with New Penny Café and Enroute Coffee and Tea House (top center) listens to feedback from Integro Bank CEO Thomas J. Inserra during a discussion at an SMB Labs workshop on Friday, April 25, at ASU's West Valley campus.



Laura Hansen, owner of Saddle Mountain Brewing Company, talks about her growth goals in a SMB Labs breakout workshop on Friday, April 25, at ASU's West Valley campus.